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Learner beliefs for successful study abroad experience: A case study

Irina Zaykovskaya ^{a,*}, Hima Rawal ^a, Peter De Costa ^b^a Second Language Studies, Michigan State University, Wells Hall, Rm. 320, 619 Red Cedar Road, East Lansing, MI 48824, USA^b Department of Linguistics & Germanic, Slavic, Asian and African Languages, Michigan State University, Wells Hall, Rm. 257, 619 Red Cedar Road, East Lansing, MI 48824, USA

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ABSTRACT

Second language learners' beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes about themselves as learners and their language learning process have been studied extensively (Wesely, 2012). The relationship between learner beliefs and study abroad (SA) experiences, however, has primarily been investigated in terms of what effects SA might have on learner beliefs (Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Kaypak & Ortaçtepe, 2014; Tanaka & Ellis, 2003). Notably absent is an examination of the impact of learner beliefs on actual SA experiences, and all of these studies investigated learners of English. Applying case study methodology (Duff, 2014) and drawing upon data from in-depth interviews and reflections, we investigated the beliefs of an American college learner of Russian and the ways in which they affected his SA experience. Our analysis revealed that the learner's pre-existing beliefs about language, language learning, target language, and the target language community/culture contributed positively to his SA in Russia. His positive attitudes towards the target language and community kept him motivated and helped him recognize and overcome culture shock. For example, his pre-SA belief that the immersion setting facilitated the usage of the target language prompted him to seek and seize opportunities for communication, as well use his whole linguistic and cultural repertoire.

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1. Introduction

According to the recent Open Doors report ([Institute of International Education, 2016](#)), the majority of all study abroad programs in which American undergraduates participate are short-term (typically eight weeks or less), and this phenomenon also holds true for foreign language SA programs. Such a time constraint does not afford students opportunities to develop strategies to cope with the new experience, which often comes in the form of culture and/or linguistic shock. Thus, it is vitally important to ensure that students are aware of what they might encounter ahead of time, and what measures might help enhance their experience studying abroad. Many SA programs establish different support structures accessible to students in the target language country or through online means, but it is equally crucial to make sure that learners' expectations are realistic and that they have their own internal resources they can draw upon when dealing with culture shock. Aside from individual psychological characteristics, such as resiliency, learner beliefs are often another internal resource on which

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: zaykovsk@msu.edu (I. Zaykovskaya).

students may rely. While several earlier studies (Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Kaypak & Ortaçtepe, 2014; Kim & Yang, 2010; Yang & Kim, 2011) investigated the change of learner beliefs with regard to the SA experience, the impact of the pre-existing system of learner beliefs on that experience itself largely remains terra incognita.

In response to this dearth of work in the SA research landscape, our case study explores the experience of Alyosha (pseudonym chosen by the participant), an American learner of Russian. We embarked on the case a full four months prior to the participant's departure to Russia, which enabled us to examine his beliefs about language learning in general and learning Russian in particular that he formed over the course of his studies. The learners' notes from the SA program and his post-SA reflections yielded valuable insights into the circumstances surrounding his experience abroad, and the interplay between his learner beliefs and the realities of his SA, which he had to cope with, became the focus of our study. In line with the growing demand for the methodological rigor in qualitative research (De Costa, Valmori, & Choi, 2017; Smagorinsky, 2008), we provide a detailed account of the process of our method, as well as data collection and analysis, in the Section 3.2 of this paper.

2. Literature review

2.1. Learner beliefs

Learner beliefs are generally considered to be a crucial component of language learning because they largely determine how learners perceive the language they are learning, the target language community, and the process of language learning itself. Learner beliefs may be defined as “student opinions on a variety of issues and controversies related to language learning” (Horwitz, 1988, p. 284) or “opinions and ideas that learners have about the task of learning a second/foreign language” (Barcelos & Kalaja, 2003, p. 1). The BALLI (Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory) survey, developed by Horwitz (1988) and later employed in its original or modified versions in a vast number of studies (e.g., Horwitz, 1999, 2007; Jee, 2013; Rifkin, 2000), was the first to identify the following five major areas of learner beliefs: 1) difficulty of language learning; 2) foreign language aptitude; 3) the nature of language learning; 4) learning and communication strategies; and 5) motivations and expectations.

Building on this earlier body of work, Wesely (2012) distinguished three common trends, or orientations of learner beliefs research: 1) investigating beliefs as static and related to learner characteristics (e.g., their socioeconomic status, type of institution they attend, language they study, etc.); 2) examining the influence that different learning situations (e.g., classroom vs. immersion setting) have on learner beliefs; and 3) exploring the interplay between the learner and learning situation with regard to dynamic and shifting learner beliefs. This categorization also reflects the natural evolution of learner beliefs research within the domain of second language acquisition (SLA), as it was the earlier work on learner beliefs that investigated primarily their cognitive aspects and suggested that beliefs be constituted as static mental traits of learners (see Horwitz, 1988, and later studies that utilized unmodified versions of BALLI). The overarching theme in the findings of most of these studies has been the fact that learner beliefs depend on multiple factors, including the language studied, stage of learning, and type of institution (Rifkin, 2000). Later research increasingly began to see learner beliefs as “complex and multifaceted” (Amuzie & Winke, 2009, p. 368) because of their flexible nature and situation specific manifestations.

The term “learner beliefs” is, in fact, an umbrella term subsuming such phenomena as language ideologies (De Costa, 2011), as well as attitudes towards the learning context (situation) or towards the target community. In this study, we use “learner beliefs” as an overarching term to refer to all sorts of opinions about the process of language learning, and different language learning contexts, particular languages (including, but not limited to the learner's native and target languages), and the target language country (its culture, people, etc.) that a given learner demonstrates.

2.2. Learner beliefs and study abroad

While learner beliefs and study abroad are widely researched topics in SLA research, the link between them remains underexplored. Prior research which addressed that link mostly investigated the beliefs of English learners (e.g., Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Kaypak & Ortaçtepe, 2014; Kim & Yang, 2010; Tanaka & Ellis, 2003; Yang & Kim, 2011). Recurring and corroborating findings include the change or shift in learner beliefs as a result of SA and the relationship between the amount of change and the length of time spent abroad. Amuzie and Winke (2009), who surveyed 70 international students with various L1 backgrounds studying in the US before and after their SA experiences, found changes in their participants' beliefs regarding certain aspects of language learning (learner autonomy and the role of the teacher). They also noted that more changes occurred in participants who spent more time abroad. By contrast, Kaypak and Ortaçtepe's (2014) study of 53 L1 Turkish English as a lingua franca (ELF) learners before and after SA revealed only subtle (i.e., not statistically significant) shifts in learner beliefs, prompting them to speculate that more prominent changes may be observed if the length of stay exceeds five months.

Qualitative studies, which explored the relationship between SA experience and learner beliefs, focused primarily on the dynamic, fluid nature of the beliefs. In a case study of two Korean ESL learners, Kim and Yang (2010), for example, revealed a connection between the actual SA experience and learner beliefs; their findings suggested that beliefs may serve as a mediator, helping learners recognize and appreciate opportunities for legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which, in turn, may lead to (subjective) success of the whole SA experience. In their study, Kim and Yang observed the beliefs and behaviors of two Korean students who were learning English in Canada. Though both of them generally

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